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MYSTERIOUS FIRM LINKED TO CONTRA FLIGHTS

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A company hired by the State Department to fly U.S. "humanitarian" supplies to Nicaraguan Contra rebels received telephone calls from a Salvadoran safehouse used in secret arms shipments to the rebels, documents show.

The calls were made in September to the office and residence of retired Air Force Lt. Col. Richard B. Gadd of Vienna, Va., president of AIRMACH Inc. AIRMACH was paid to fly non-lethal supplies to the Contras although it has no planes registered to it and no publicly listed telephone number.

The contact between the safehouse in San Salvador and AIRMACH represents an apparent new link between the official U.S. government humanitarian aid and the secret weapons supply operation that came to light Oct. 5 when an American-manned C-123K cargo plane was shot down over southern Nicaragua.

Government sources and a secretary who answered calls to one number appearing on a telephone bill from the safehouse confirmed that the number belonged to AIRMACH, but Gadd did not respond to repeated requests for comment on his role with the Contras.

Calls also were made to a telephone number at a house in Vienna that Gadd listed as his residence in corporate records. It is now answered by a tape-recording saying the number is not in service.

Robert Duemling, who ran the special State Department office that disbursed \$27 million in non-lethal aid to the rebels, refused to identify any of the five companies hired to fly the supplies, but said the carriers were examined for reliability before contracts were granted.

"We weren't under any heat to use anyone," Duemling said.

He added that some of the air freight companies leased airplanes and hired crews for the Contra aid flights, which he said had ended by late spring.

The General Accounting Office, Congress' investigative arm, has criticized management of the \$27 million, saying more than half the money could not be tracked, with millions of dollars disappearing into offshore bank accounts and the Honduran military.

The CIA and the Reagan administration have denied involvement with the arms-laden C-123K flight that left two Americans dead and one, Eugene Hasenfus, captured in Nicaragua. Hasenfus has said the operation was directed by two Cuban-Americans who he claimed worked for the CIA.

Administration sources and Contra backers have said the air resupply operation was part of a secret White House-initiated program that used former intelligence operatives to assist the Contras during a two-year congressional ban on U.S. military assistance. Those sources spoke only on condition they not be identified.

Salvadoran telephone records also show repeated calls from the safehouse to private office lines of Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, a senior staff aide on President Reagan's National Security Council. North, the chief White House contact with the Contras over the past two years, said through a spokesman that "to his knowledge" he never received calls from a safehouse.

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One source identified AIRMACH as the principal air freight company hired by the State Department to fly non-lethal aid to the Contra counterrevolutionaries who are fighting to overthrow Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government. Although continuing a ban on lethal military aid last year, Congress approved \$27 million in non-lethal supplies.

Last month, Congress approved Reagan's request to lift the arms ban and grant \$100 million in new aid to the Contras.

Classified records obtained by The Associated Press, covering the early phase of the humanitarian aid program, show AIRMACH received a contract in January worth \$182,000 for "air charter services." According to the Federal Aviation Administration, AIRMACH has no planes registered to it. The company operates out of an office in a small shopping and business complex in Vienna, a Washington suburb.

The Miami Herald reported last week that a visitor's logbook at Gadd's Vienna office showed that "Ed Garay" signed in Oct. 2, three days before the C-123K was shot down. A Pennsylvania airfield owner, Edward de Garay, is president of Corporate Air Services Inc., the name of the company that Hasenfus said hired him.

Hasenfus, a veteran of the CIA-owned Air America during the Vietnam War, said Corporate Air Services was connected to Southern Air Transport of Miami, another company once owned by the CIA and now a leading logistical air carrier for the Pentagon.

The Salvadoran phone records also show repeated calls from the safehouse to Southern Air. Southern Air spokesman William Kress has denied any connection between the company and the downed flight, but acknowledged the flight's co-pilot, Wallace Blaine Sawyer Jr., worked for Southern Air until April.

Hasenfus said William J. Cooper, the flight's pilot and another Air America veteran, had said he was working for Corporate Air Services. Cooper also carried a Southern Air identification card that was found in the crash.

Logs kept by Sawyer show him flying two flights - one in January from Miami and the other in February from New Orleans - to El Salvador's Ilopango military airfield, where the secret Contra supply operation was based.

Government sources said those two flights, aboard Southern Air planes, match up with flights contracted to AIRMACH. One source said the evidence suggests AIRMACH and Corporate Air Services operated effectively as fronts for Southern Air.

Pentagon records show Gadd was assigned in 1981 to the Air Force chief of staff's office of plans and operations. Virginia corporate records also list him as president of American National Management Corp., which shares office space in Vienna with AIRMACH.

Retired Army Col. C.L. Stearns, who served at the Joint Chiefs of Staff special operations agency in 1982, also reportedly worked at Gadd's company and received calls at his home from the safehouse, but a receptionist at Gadd's office said Tuesday that Stearns had left the firm.